

## A Spy Spectacular From Fleet Street

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LONDON—The reading public in this lively and most competitive newspaper town in the Western world is currently enjoying one of the bloodiest journalistic battles in memory. Last Sunday, Britain's two Sunday "heavyweights," the *Sunday Times* (circulation 1,500,000) and *Observer* (900,000) leaped into print—almost but not quite simultaneously—with the latest details of the career of master spy Harold (Kim) Philby.

Philby's extraordinary 30 years as a double agent for Russia and Britain's MI-6 came to light nearly five years ago when he fled to sanctuary in Moscow, and thus far, at least, the "startling revelations" promised by both newspapers have generally been public knowledge. More fascinating to the vicarious participants in Fleet Street's never-ending battle for circulation and attention is what the Philby "spy spectacular" reveals about the ineptitude of journalistic "espionage" on one of the most gossipy streets on earth.

IF THIS LATEST Philby caper has a beginning, it is probably a year ago when the *Observer's* Middle East correspondent, Patrick Seale, took a leave of absence to collaborate with the now-estranged Mrs. Philby on a book about her husband's fantastic career. The *Observer* had hired Philby as its man in the Middle East after receiving what proved to be erroneous government assurances that he was out of the spy business, and Seale had replaced Philby when he defected in 1963. The *Observer* obtained rights to serialize Seale's book in the British Isles.

Surprisingly, the *Sunday Times* did not find out about the Seale-Mrs. Philby project until early this year. Apparently to take the gloss off Seale's book, which is due to be published next year, the *Sunday Times* quickly dispatched its super-sleuth Insight reporter team to write an exhaustive series of articles on Philby. The *Observer*, whose intelligence system was no better than the *Sunday Times*, did not learn that the *Sunday Times* was now following Philby's traces until less than a fortnight ago, when a brief item in *Newsweek* tipped them.

Events then moved swiftly. Seale, who was pledged to give the *Observer* only serialization rights to the book, met with John Philby, 24-year-old son of the spy, who had just returned from Moscow on a mission financed by the *Sunday Times*. Based on his conversation with the talkative young Philby, who has since been spirited out of town by the *Sunday Times*, Seale concluded that the *Sunday Times* was about to spring its series on an unsuspecting public, and on the *Observer*.

The *Observer's* fear that it was about to be "scooped" may have been heightened by the appearance at about this time of a government "D-notice," a device by which editors are asked to voluntarily withhold certain information involving national security. The D-notice was worded to cover almost anything about British intelligence operations, and it was strongly suspected that Whitehall issued it to prevent a *Sunday Times* "spy expose" calculated to counteract the *Observer's* publication of the Svetlana Stalin memoirs (which the *Observer* won by outbidding a number of newspapers, including the *Sunday Times*.)

SUSPICIOUS of the government's timing, and after a bit more sleuthing, the *Observer* decided to ignore the D-notice and go with a Philby story last Sunday in order to blunt the expected blow from the *Sunday Times*. In what must have been a long Friday night, Seale pitched in with two *Observer* staffers to produce a Philby story, and the *Observer* advertised that it would publish, the following Sunday, a first-person account by Mrs. Philby, ghost-written by Seale.

Scarcely minutes after the first edition of the *Observer* hit the street Saturday night, the *Sunday Times*, which was holding its Philby series for the following Sunday, flew into action. Gameily but somewhat lamely it managed to put together a Philby story for the readers of its later editions, and promised further articles that would document "how Britain's security forces were penetrated in the crucial cold war years."

On the following day, the country's daily newspapers started nibbling at the leftovers, ranging from reports that Philby is now married to the ex-wife of fellow-spy Donald Maclean (who also lives in Moscow) to interviews with Philby's former intelligence chief who indignantly labeled his ex-protege a "blackguard."

It is too early to say what action if any the government will take over the ignoring of its D-notice, but at least one embarrassed Whitehall official found a bit of solace. "If anybody's security services need looking at," he observed, "it's Fleet Street's."